Teaching Excellence Case Study

Engaging students and breaking down barriers through innovative learning spaces
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Course: MSc Industrial Product Design, BA Product Design

Student Level: Postgraduate and Undergraduate

LINKS TO EDUCATION STRATEGY PILLARS

- Intercultural and international engagement
- Research inspired teaching
- Community contribution and responsibility

AIMS

The Industrial Product Design course attracts **highly international** student cohorts. It was observed that some students were reluctant to engage in class activities, and so **different learning spaces** (both physical and online) were introduced in order to encourage more active participation from students across the board.

ACTIONS

A range of different learning spaces have been trialled with students on the course. Rather than the traditional class-room layout, teaching has been delivered in environments with **clusters of tables,** enabling small group discussions to take place, as well as more **random, dispersed** layouts which encourage students to move freely around the class-room. Importantly, having set students an initial task, lecturers have taken a "back seat" in these classes to maximise interactions amongst students. This transforms the space from a classic teacher-student environment into a much more dynamic **student-led arena**.

This approach has been replicated in **hybrid learning spaces.** As part of an Online International Learning (OIL) project, students have been able to interact with peers at a Tongji University, China, again with minimal "teacher" input. In so doing, they have engaged in collaborative learning using online tools (e.g. WeChat, Teamviewer) as well as sharing other insights into the physical spaces of their respective design studios.

IMPACT

Innovative use of learning spaces has certainly **influenced students' behaviour**. Freed from the constraints of the conventional "teacher-student" set up, many students who were previously unlikely to contribute to in-class activities have **become far more involved**.

A greater degree of **interaction across cultures and nationalities** has taken place than a traditional classroom layout would permit. Significantly, students have **maintained many of these personal relationships** with their peers after making the initial connection, thereby creating new communities.

Ongoing **academic research** into these innovations has generated numerous conference papers and publications, as well as feeding back into teaching practice.

STUDENT FEEDBACK

- "It was a **challenging** project and good opportunity of collaborating with different design disciplines."
- "Great to be part of OIL project. Definitely good for helping us become **independent.** Forces us to work with people we don't know. Quickly become a team."
- "I like the philosophy of the course in that students are encouraged to become independent and have **confidence** in making decisions."

Students interacting in a dispersed classroom layout– with not a teacher in sight! True facilitation of learning.

TOP TIPS

- Experimenting with different learning environments, whether physical, virtual, or hybrid of the two, can have **profound implications** for how students interact and learn.

- By giving students chance to interact outside of orthodox learning spaces and power structures, practitioners can gain **valuable insights** into the barriers to communication which they routinely face.

- **Taking a step back** from students' learning activities may feel counterintuitive, but doing so can enable them to engage more willingly, break down barriers within their peer group, and form new communities.

- **Reconnecting with students** as their teacher after such an activity can be a challenge, but consider scheduling short breaks within the session where you can guide their learning, before putting students back in the driving seat.